



## Portland, Nextel on the same frequency

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The city of Portland, once an outspoken critic of cellular-phone carrier Nextel and its interference with emergency communications networks, is now purchasing phones from the company.

In the past month, Portland has bought 315 of Nextel's combination cell phone and two-way radio for nonemergency employees through a discounted deal the state government inked with Nextel.

The deal points to two trends: Nextel is appeasing even its fiercest critics by developing a plan to avoid interfering with police, fire and ambulance radios; and the company's combination of two-way radios and cell phones is increasingly winning over large employers.

"We've had city employees consistently ask for it," said Mark Gray, interim director of Portland's Bureau of Communications and Networking.

But until recently, the city had a moratorium on purchasing Nextel phones because their signals interfered with the municipal public emergency communications system, which operates on nearby space on the frequency spectrum.

"We cannot have any tolerance for interference to our communications from the galloping cellular market," Portland Police Chief Mark Kroeker said in 2001.

An investigation that year by The Oregonian found that police and fire officials in at least 21 states have reported at least one confirmed or suspected instance of Nextel's wireless phone signals interfering with public safety radios or in-car computers.

Since then, Nextel, of Reston, Va., has improved many of its cell towers to reduce interference. And along with public safety groups, it has crafted a plan to pay \$850 million to replace public safety and car communications systems nationwide for municipalities and taxi companies that use public frequencies. The Federal Communications Commission has yet to rule on the plan.

"I won't go so far to say it will resolve all of the issues," said Glen Nash, past president of the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials. "But considering all of the circumstances, it offers the best opportunity for coming to an equitable solution all of the players will accept. It has the potential to eliminate interference."

Nextel has ironed out issues that it refused to address a few years ago, said RoxAnn Brown, the former head of Washington County's dispatch center who was chairwoman of a nationwide committee on the interference.

"I have to give Nextel credit -- they have gotten their act together," said Brown, who now directs the dispatch center in Nashville, Tenn. "They had been very helpful and diligent in

cleaning up the messes."

Nextel's actions were strong enough to get Portland to lift its ban on the company.

"It's become something that we consider controlled," Portland's Gray said. "All the major issues we had at this time are resolved. It doesn't mean all the problems are gone, and it doesn't mean they're gone forever. But Nextel has done a good job mitigating things."

Under the discounted contract, Nextel's Motorola phones range from \$69.99 to \$314.99. The monthly rates range from \$22.43 to \$269.99.

City employees -- often upper-level managers -- have demanded the cell phones, which also contain two-way radios that enable instant communications.

"The biggest advantage is for employees who would typically need a cell phone and a radio and a pager," Gray said. "There would be people who need to communicate with the entire group and make cellular phone calls and receive pages. The cost is less than it would be to maintain all three."

Nextel is the only major cell-phone carrier that offers two-way radio service, something that has differentiated it from other companies in the struggling telecommunications sector. The company's 2002 sales of \$8.7 billion were up 13.4 percent from the previous year.

"When you're a business, you want an always-on system," said Goli Ameri, president of eTinium, a Portland telecommunications consulting firm. "You don't have to dial a number. You don't have to worry about the fact you need to leave a message. With city governments, they do operate like a business, and there is a lot of value to the fact that you're able to find a contact when and where you need them."

Some smaller carriers also provide two-way radio service, Nash said, but they carry risks. In California, a sanitation district received 30 days' notice that its provider was going out of business.

"You have to be aware these things can happen when you're using a commercial system," Nash said.

Gray said that while the Nextel radios suit the needs of nonemergency managers, the city has no plans to place emergency workers on Nextel phones.

"Our public safety radio system has a higher level of consistency and reliability than Nextel's," Gray said. Jeffrey Kosseff: 503-294-7605; [jeffkosseff@news.oregonian.com](mailto:jeffkosseff@news.oregonian.com)

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